’Citizen Journalism’: Bridging the Discrepancy in Singapore’s General Elections News

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Studie

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Abstract

The political expression of ordinary Internet users in Singapore has received the attention of some scholars but very little has been specifically written about citizen journalism during general elections. Since the arrival of the Internet in Singapore in 1995, the People's Action Party (PAP) government has actively sought to control the supply of online political content during the election campaign period. This paper looks at how online political expressions of ordinary Internet users and the regulations to control them have taken shape during the last three general elections in 1997, 2001 and 2006. In absolute electoral terms there seems to have been no impact over the last three general elections. However, as a supplementary medium for alternative information during elections, the Internet has made some headway. It remains to be seen if this headway will have an impact on the absolute electoral results in future elections or become the target of increased control. (*Received July 20, 2006; accepted for publication October 17, 2006*)

Keywords: Singapore, elections, Internet, Journalism, opposition

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Studie

'Bürger-Journalismus' – Die Aufdeckung der Widersprüchlichkeiten in der Berichterstattung über die allgemeinen Wahlen in Singapur

James Gomez

Abstract

Die Forschung hat jüngst den politischen Äußerungen von Internetnutzern verstärkte Aufmerksamkeit geschenkt. Bislang ist jedoch sehr wenig über die journalistischen Beiträge von Bürgern im Internet erforscht worden. Seit Einführung des Internets hat die People's Action Party (PAP) während des Wahlkampfes versucht, eine stärkere Kontrolle der politischen Inhalte im Internet zu sichern. Der vorliegende Aufsatz behandelt die politischen Äußerungen und rechtlichen Kontrollen bei den Wahlen in den Jahren 1997, 2001 und 2006. An den Ergebnissen lässt sich bislang keine Wirkung ablesen. Als ergänzendes Medium für alternative Informationen während des Wahlkampfes hat das Internet jedoch Fortschritte gemacht. Es bleibt abzuwarten, ob diese Fortschritte auch Wirkung auf die Wahlen haben oder ob sie zur Zielscheibe zunehmender Kontrolle werden. (*Eingereicht am 20.07.2006; angenommen zur Veröffentlichung am 17.10.2006*)

Keywords: Singapur, Wahlen, Internet, Journalismus, Opposition

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1 Introduction

Whether it is the use of the Internet by civil society actors to create public space (Ho, Baber & Khondker 2002) or to examine how the authoritarian Singapore regime has responded to the use of the Internet by individuals and groups for democratic expression (Sussman 2003), the relationship between democracy and the Internet has become an important focus of study. It has prompted one set of contributors (Banerjee and Yeo 2003) to argue that context-related variables are important in determining if the Internet can indeed deliver democracy socio-political contexts such as Singapore. This view is shared by another academic who argues that the capacity for new media to have a democratic impact lies in the existence of an organised political force, and the ruling party's agenda in Singapore is to prevent precisely that from happening (Rodan 2003). Thus, non-technological factors are important to understanding why the use of the Internet for democratic expression in Singapore is much lower than in Malaysia, argues another writer. (George 2003; 2006).

This paper adds to this group of studies on the Internet and democracy in Singapore, but its special focus is on elections and the online expressions of non-party affiliated individuals and groups or citizen journalism. Since the Internet became publicly accessible in Singapore in 1995, non-political party affiliated individuals and groups have been using different online "platforms" to supply alternative political content during elections. Motivated by a view that the local media is biased against opposition parties, the online medium has been harnessed by non-political party affiliated groups and individuals to provide information about the opposition not available in the local media. These online platforms have included discussion groups, mailing lists, websites, online petitions, podcasts and blogs, signaling that over the last decade online political expression during elections has evolved and diversified in Singapore.

Although there is one study that has examined the supply of political content by political parties (Kluver 2004), there is no study to date that has exclusively examined the supply of online political content offered through platforms set up by non-political party Internet users during the election campaign period. Hence, this paper seeks to fill the gap by analysing how the trends in non-party affiliated political expression over the Internet have evolved during the last three general elections in 1997, 2001 and 2006. In particular it discusses the impact of the Internet and blogs during the 2006 general elections. In doing so, this paper

seeks to reflect on the following questions. How has online political expression by non-political party individuals and groups during elections evolved in Singapore? How has the PAP government responded to this? What kind of impact, if any, has online political expression had on Singapore politics? Can the Internet contribute to multi-party democracy? What challenges will online citizen journalism in Singapore face in the coming years?

To facilitate this research, interviews with long time users of the Internet were important to collate and analyze the information gathered. The bulk of the interviews were undertaken in 2005 as part of the author's fieldwork for a PhD. Additional information was gathered during and after the 2006 general elections. The interviews included both face-to-face in-depth interviews and questions sent via e-mail. In interviews conducted by this researcher with Internet activists in late 2005, almost all individuals interviewed noted that blogging has become the new arena of political expression. Unlike previous general elections, the 2006 elections saw a significant surge in online political expression. Blogs in particular showed they had the potential to widen the alternative coverage through citizen reporting. This led the 2006 elections to be dubbed as Singapore's first "Internet election". This surge in online activity was in part due to the presence of further innovation on the Internet, such as blogs, podcasting and vodcasting. It was also in part due to many bloggers in the 2006 elections ignoring restrictions put in place by the ruling party. Because blogs are part of ongoing studies on citizen journalism in Singapore, a look at blogs from the perspective of how online political expression during elections have evolved in the city-state can be informative.

Until blogging became prominent in the 2006 general elections, many academics and analysts were largely skeptical about the proliferation and impact of blogs. They were also skeptical whether blogs and the Internet could have any political impact on general elections in Singapore. Associate Professor Randolph Kluver, executive director of the Singapore Research Centre had this to say before the 2006 general elections,

> Blogs are an interesting place to discuss politics, and are more immediate and accessible but they are not going to radicalize any current political realities. (Koh and Ho 2005)

Another Internet researcher, Tan Tarn How, a fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, noted that the Internet did not level the playing field in the 2001 general elections. Of the 2006 elections he had this to say,

> Most Singaporeans have little care for politics except when politics is turned into entertainment. The elections won't change this fundamental fact. ... if the Internet fails again, it won't be the Internet which actually flunks the test. (Tan 2006)

Collectively they cited the presence of strict rules, the small number of blog readers, voter apathy and the state of the technology as reasons. Media reports echoed that blogs are not believed to have a great impact on public opinion yet, citing the strict online campaigning laws as obstacles to blogs radicalising Singapore politics. It was speculated that these laws "will likely dissuade political activists from using blogs to push their cause", especially during election time (Koh and Ho 2005).

While the academics and researchers were skeptical, members of the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) were wary about blogs. In the run up to the 2006 general elections, the ruling party announced "clarifications" on what was permissible and not-permissible on the Internet during elections. The rationale given by the PAP and its representatives for controlling political expression by lay people over the Internet is that "politics is a serious matter and not entertainment" (*The Straits Times*, 6 April 2006). The PAP government argued that without such laws online expressions by lay people may encourage irresponsible discussion. The ruling party prefers to confine political reportage to the local mainstream media which it sees as setting the tone for Singapore politics (Chia, Low and Luo 2006).

The literature review undertaken in the next section shows that the media features prominently in how the opposition is constructed in Singapore. It is also important in terms of opposition outreach. Without fair access to the media, electoral success is also impossible to guarantee. The media is seen as one very important structural obstacle hindering the development of multi-party democracy in Singapore. However, given this long history of media bias, the question of whether the Internet has changed the political landscape or not is important. The paper argues that the use of the Internet to disseminate political content not available in the local media during elections has made this medium a source of alternative information during elections.

2 Media Reportage and Elections in Singapore

In a study on the role of the media in the 1991 elections, Kuo concluded that the PAP was given greater coverage by the media – by both major daily newspapers and television (Kuo et al 1993). The study also found that voters were divided along party lines on the issue of the 'fairness' of the media. PAP supporters thought the media was fair and the supporters of the opposition disputed this. In a follow up study the same group of researchers focused on how the media directed the attention of Singaporeans to particular issues or encouraged the public to avoid other questions entirely (Kuo et al 1996).

Francis Seow, former attorney-general, Workers' Party candidate and Internal Security Act detainee and author of *The Media Enthralled: Singapore Revisited*, cited the above survey published by the Asian Media and Information Centre (AMIC) on the media's role in the 1991 general elections as being very instructive.

> The researchers could not but come to the inevitable conclusion that newspapers, radio and television coverage on the election was 'skewed heavily towards the ruling party, the PAP. In both newspapers and television, the PAP received twice the amount of coverage as that given to all the opposition parties combined'. It was not an epiphany. It was a confirmation of what Singaporeans of all political hues, including other scholars, had known all along. (Seow 1998:207)

The Internet was not mentioned in either study, as it did not exist in Singapore at this time. But Kuo's work provides a small benchmark of how Singapore's controlled media behaved before the Internet arrived. As such it confirms the widespread view that the opposition parties were seriously disadvantaged by the conventional press.

Scholars who have written on elections and opposition parties often note the obstructive role of the local media. Most say that media coverage of the general elections in Singapore showed that the mass media has been heavily biased towards the PAP (Rodan 1996; da Cunha 1997; Ooi 1998; Yeo 2002; Mutalib 2003; George 2006). Mutalib, writing about the 2001 general elections, said

> insofar as the elections are concerned, it has been more than evident that the media industry has helped the PAP to have the competitive edge over its Opposition rivals. (Mutalib 2002: 37)

He goes on to add that observers of the local media have to be discerning about the volume of coverage of the opposition as opposed to the "quality of coverage",

> It is to be conceded that more spaces have been given to cover Opposition parties in this recent election and that some stories that were printed of the Opposition candidates were factually correct. However, the manner by which some of the stories were crafted and headlined had certainly painted them in poor light and could have influenced voter behaviour. (Mutalib 2002:28)

Long time Singapore watcher, academic Garry Rodan has this to say of the bias of the local media,

> ...government's critics or detractors are often lampooned, ignored, or alternately, subjected to a relentless scrutiny of the sort those actually wielding power in Singapore are spared. In recent times there has been some increased space for non-establishment (but not opposition) figures to express criticisms of government policy through the forum pages of local newspapers. In the main, though, this concerns details of policy rather than any fundamental challenge to the PAP agenda or philosophy. (Rodan 2000:175)

A number of reports on the elections and electoral system by NGOs also note that the control of the local and foreign media is a structural obstacle to free and fair elections (Open Singapore Centre 2000; Mannikas and Jennings 2001; ARDA 2005; ANFREL 2006). One of the reports had this to say,

> Political leaders require the media to disseminate their views to the entire readership. In the early years of political life, Singapore had an independent and lively local media. But they were slowly brought to a halt by the Government (Open Singapore Centre 2000:10).

Former *The Straits Times* journalist turned academic, Cherian George, noted in his review of the Singapore media that the media has taken upon itself the duty of deciding whether the opposition has opinions that are worthy of reporting, in contrast to the expected role of the media in a democracy – namely to report what the opposition thinks regardless of the editor's view about the quality of these statements:

> Opposition politicians complain of unfair coverage, not without some justification. The press does not seem to subscribe to the theory that the opposition is an indispensable pillar of democracy, and therefore inherently newsworthy regardless of its quality. Instead, opposition politicians must satisfy editors that they are offering serious and credible ideas, before they are deemed worthy of more than minimal coverage. (George 2002:180)

George goes on to criticise the justification given by the press corps for such censorship, namely that its unsympathetic treatment of the opposition is a fair reflection of public opinion (George 2002:180). George's statement gives us an insight as to why there has been so little reportage in the Singapore media on the political opposition and why this has led to the widespread view that there is no opposition in Singapore. The opposition is either kept out of the local media or when it is reported, the focus is highly negative. With regards to elections, he had this to say:

> The point of an election being to determine the people's wishes, media bias in election coverage cannot be justified by an as-yet-unknown popular will, and indeed can be criticised as undermining the freedom and fairness of the poll. Editors defend their pro-PAP bias by pointing out that even newspapers in the West take sides during elections. Readers' complaints that SPH, as a monopoly, has a moral obligation to be fair in its election coverage have not succeeded in changing editors' minds. (George 2002:180)

Ross Worthington, an Australian political scientist who conducted his research through the Australian National University, has noted that even the Singapore government's very own Feedback Unit survey showed that 81% of the citizens saw the media as a tool of the government (Worthington 2003: 232). The general view is that opposition parties in Singapore do not get fair coverage in the local media, especially during the election campaign period.

Former local broadcast journalists, such as Viswa Sadasiwan, have publicly stated that the coverage by local media of the elections is too timid (*The Straits Times*, 26 February 2006). Media watchers such as Arun Mahizhan from the Institute of Policy Studies state that the space given to the coverage of opposition news has grown compared to the 1970s and 1980s (*The Straits Times*, 26 February

2006). However, as Mutalib has argued earlier, the issue is not of volume but of tone. This is in part due to the fact that the local media does not take a balanced approach in reporting the ruling PAP and the opposition parties. For instance, Seah Chiang Nee, a Singaporean columnist for the Malaysian Star newspaper, in his media review of the 2006 general elections noted that among other things there was no mention of the numbers or photographs of the huge crowds that attend opposition rallies (Seah 2006).

Hence, Singapore's opposition movement has long dismissed the local media as the mouth piece of the ruling party. David Marshall, Singapore's former Chief Minister and ambassador to France, once called local journalists "either PAP (People's Action Party) wallahs or bootlickers" and "running dogs of the PAP and poor prostitutes" (Chua 1998:143). The opposition views the local media as a tool of the ruling party to ensure that multiparty democracy is kept suppressed in Singapore. Opposition parties often attribute the negative of image of their party directly to how the mainstream media reports about them. For instance, the Singapore Democratic Party argued in a post-2006 election public forum that its negative image among the Singaporean public was due to the PAP's ability to shape voter's impression about the SDP through the media (*The Straits Times*, 3 June 2006).

To the opposition, the media should not be a "tool of the government", but rather an instrument for promoting a genuine, participatory model of democracy in Singapore – that is a multiparty democracy. Hence, it prompted one opposition politician to say,

> It is only when opposition parties have equal access to the media, are not disadvantaged from raising funds, are able to campaign freely, constituency boundaries are announced well ahead of time, and so on that elections will be free and fair. (Chee Soon Juan 2005:49)

As a result some opposition parties such as the Workers' Party deliberately avoid contact with the media and prefer to use direct communications such as door to door visits with the voters (Rajan and Low 2006). Although political parties can publicise their work through face-to-face contact, brochures, pamphlets and party newsletters, these can be more costly and less extensive in their outreach than media coverage. The media can also offer credibility among members of the public as opposed to leaflets or materials produced by political parties themselves.

From the above literature review, there is ample evidence to show that opposition parties in Singapore do not enjoy fair media coverage especially during elections. The arrival of the Internet was widely heralded the medium that will allow various users to alter this imbalance. International NGOs, local groups and individuals and opposition parties have all attempted in one way or another to use the Internet to correct the imbalance. This paper reviews and analyses the attempts by local groups and individuals to use the Internet for this purpose. Has the arrival of the Internet in Singapore allowed ordinary Internet users to alter the local media bias and impact Singapore's general elections results?

3 General Elections 1997: Experiments with Alternative Citizen Reporting

The evolution of alternative election reporting by Internet users is linked closely to the development of online political expression in Singapore. This evolution can be broadly divided into three phases. The first phase was from 1992 to 1997 and was marked by the emergence of online forums and the introduction of public Internet access in Singapore in 1995. The early years were a period where the Internet was largely legislation free. But barely a year after the Internet was publicly available in 1995, regulations were introduced to control political content.

Early Internet users agree that public online political expression on Singapore related topics first surfaced on the Internet via newsgroups or bulletin boards. One discussion group, *soc.culture.asean* which was formed in 1989 has been noted as the first online platform in which Singaporean issues were discussed (Tan 2001). It was only later in 1992 that a Singapore specific online discussion group, *soc.culture.singapore* was set up. The discussion group carried criticisms, defence of different political positions, alerts to political events and activities, and opinions of every sort. During the early 90s the only politically triggered online discussion was about the 1993 presidential election[1]. Long-time forummer Yap Keng Ho

[1] Presidential elections do not cause a stir on online forums. The first election for the elected presidency was in 1993. The mainstream media supported the PAP government's favoured candidate Ong Teng Cheong, and at the time there were no personal websites or such things as blogs promoting either Ong or his rival, a former civil servant. Online discussions in forums in 1993 such as *soc.culture.singapore* did carry discussion on the criteria of selection for presidential candidates. Similar discussions in other online forums continued in subsequent presidential elections in 1999 and 2005, but these were again mostly confined to the procedural issue of selecting candidates and

recalls that these discussions centred largely on the criteria of qualification of presidential candidates and comments about how the contest for the presidential elections was mere political theatre orchestrated by the ruling party and not genuine[2]. Even though users were anonymous, most people used pen names. *Soc.culture.singapore* continues to this day, but over the years its popularity has waned.

Even in this early period, when there was no legislation governing online political expression, such expression was monitored and concern was expressed by PAP government officials whenever there were strong views expressed online about policy matters. One early Internet user, Dennis Kwek, recalls an incident sometime in 1992 or 1993. He was then president of the Singapore Student's Society of the University of Essex and was contacted by an official of the Singapore embassy in London over comments by a Singapore student named Terence Chua on *soc.culture.singapore* about Singapore's education policy. The embassy official wanted to know what motivated Terence Chua into making those strong comments online about the PAP government's education policy[3]. These early online discussions were mostly among overseas Singaporean students who had Internet access in the late 80s and early 90s through their universities.

In Singapore, before the Internet was widely available in 1995, the Bulletin Board Service (BBS) at the National University of Singapore was used to discuss politics during the 1991 election and the 1992 by-election[4]. The BBS was run by Technet that allowed staff and students to post text-based content on an electronic notice board, some of which were alternative reports of the elections. All these postings however could only be viewed internally and were not accessible to the general public, although staff and students from the Nanyang Technological

candidates' qualification criteria. The 2005 presidential election saw some political traffic online. Seen as a potentially eligible candidate, Andrew Kuan set up a personal website promoting himself as a candidate. His website contained information about his background, qualifications, curriculum vitae, various other details about his life and beliefs, all for the purpose of advocating his candidacy for the office of the elected president of Singapore. In addition, after he was deemed unqualified to run for president by the relevant government committee, an online petition supporting him as a presidential candidate was also started. But online postings in discussion forums about the presidential elections have been low compared to general elections because of the absence of real contests.

[2] Interview with Yap Keng Ho on 27 September 2005 in Singapore.

[3] Interview with Dennis Kwek on 23 August 2005 in Singapore.

[4] Interview with Goh Meng Seng, long time forummer and member of the Workers' Party in Singapore.

University could also access it. Since the wider public had no access to information posted on BBS, its impact was negligible. It was after the Internet was widely made available in 1995 and the establishment of various online forums and websites that alternative reporting of election rallies and other election related news became accessible to the wider public.

One feature of online political expression in Singapore is that the early online platforms often acted as a catalyst or a staging board for the development and growth of new platforms. This is what happened in the case of Sintercom. Founded in 1994, the people who made up Sintercom were early participants of *soc.culture.singapore*. Sintercom's principal founder was Tan Chong Kee, then a PhD student at Stanford University. The website's first incarnation was the Singapore Electronic Forum, a newsgroup he established in October 1994 and hosted on the university server. It grew into Sintercom as more features, not all political in nature, were added. The website then launched SGDaily, a mailing list that disseminated internationally published articles on Singapore. Sintercom also featured the "NOT the Straits Times Forum" section, which published contributions that had been rejected by the forum page of *The Straits Times*. During this initial period of growth, Sintercom was a virtual community where almost all of its editors were either tertiary students or working in information technology firms, and more than half of them were based outside Singapore (George 2006:100-109).

In mid-1996 *The Straits Times* drew attention to Sintercom's role as a political forum. After which the then-Singapore Broadcasting Authority (SBA) announced new rules governing websites. Known as the Class Licence Scheme, it was introduced in July 1996 (Le Blond 1996) about six months before the general elections, which were announced later that year. The regulation required websites dealing with political and religious issues to register with the authorities. It also made website owners responsible for all the contents on their sites. When the new rules were announced, meetings between Sintercom editors and senior public servants were initiated and these involved discussions over the legislations affecting Sintercom. SBA eventually agreed to exempt Sintercom from registering under the regulation – the Class Licence Scheme – on the grounds of the latter's arguments and assurance that they will "exercise responsibility, intelligence and maturity". Although Sintercom carried critical and independent commentary, it was labelled as not being "rabidly anti-government" and so did not go beyond

the bounds of government tolerance (George 2006:113). Hence, it escaped this Internet legislation but only for a few years.

During the run up to the 1997 general elections (campaigning for which began in late December 1996) articles and reports on election rallies and polls could be found in some of the forums. A front runner in election reporting was Sintercom, which just months after receiving its exemption from registering as a political site, started online reporting of the general elections. It organised teams of volunteers to attend various election rallies and write reports on them. Additionally, it put up past election results, constituency maps and extracts from the various party manifestoes. Apart from Sintercom, there were also postings on *soc.culture.singapore* and some of these postings were also compiled and carried on the Sintercom site[5]. Reviewing its own online effort, Sintercom founder Tan Chong Kee said that overall its reportage was timelier and fairer in coverage than the mainstream Singapore newspapers (Tan 2001:41-42).

As we shall see in the next section, that perhaps it was this capacity to report on elections that resulted in the site once again being labeled as a political site in 2001 and compelled to register as such. Although the Class Licence was introduced, it was only actively implemented in the next phase of online political expression in Singapore (see following section). Nevertheless, it set the precedence for more laws on elections advertising to be introduced through amendments to the Parliamentary Elections Act in 2001. In the next few years the Societies Act, Political Donations Act, Penal Code, and Defamation Act would also come into play in disciplining online political expression. On the whole in the Singapore case, forums can be argued to be the precursors to the emergence of political websites in Singapore. The bulletin board as a vehicle of political expression still remains popular as it is simple, text based, highly interactive and has evolved to support links to podcasts and video downloads.

4 1997 to 2001: Height of Civil Society's Online Political Expression

The second phase of development is from 1997 to 2001. If the first phase was marked with the emergence and growth of online forums, the second phase was marked more by the emergence of explicitly political websites with the first ones

[5] Interview with Tan Chong Kee, founder of Sintercom, 4 September 2005.

being hosted overseas. The second phase is also the era when additional legislations were introduced to contain political expression emerging from the Internet and prevent them from impacting the offline world.

Two overseas sites were set up in 1997 following disappointment with local media coverage of the general elections in that year. These include Singapore Window which carries a regular and comprehensive list of news articles about Singapore from foreign news sources, and links to other websites. There is also the Singaporeans for Democracy website (which stopped updating since March 2003) which put out alternative and critical political reports and commentary on Singapore politics. Both are widely believed to run by Singapore dissidents based overseas (George 2006:81). These were the first online attempts to supply alternative content on Singapore politics in an organized and sustained way.

Up to this phase, political sites and discussion groups had largely existed as online entities with no corresponding activities or organisations on the ground. The only offline political discussion groups with websites were the Socratic Circle and the Roundtable which were both separately registered with the Registrar of Societies in 1994. Activities of these groups were restricted to members only or invited guests to closed door meetings; furthermore, members cannot belong to any political parties. These groups maintained websites which include information about their organisations. The Tangent is the third known group to be registered for the purpose of promoting intellectual discussions on current affairs in Mandarin among its members and was inaugurated in 2000 (www.thetangent.org.sg). These sites were not dynamic, only infrequently updated and heavily proscribed by the Societies Act. A little known case involving the Socratic Circle, which was set up in 1994, can shed some light on their online restrictions.

Problems arose then when its members posted survey questions online to solicit opinions from Internet surfers in 1995 (Rodan 1996). Officials from the Registrar of Societies asked the group to discontinue reaching out to non-members through the Internet because they were contravening the rules. These rules held that the Socratic Circle could conduct political discussions only among their members, and by soliciting information from surfers through the Internet, they were breaking this rule (Gomez 2002:35). This shows how rigidly the Societies Act was applied to such political discussion groups when they attempted to interact with surfers online. There have been no known incident about its online existence and the Tangent continues to be active.

However, the restrictions of the Societies Act that prevented discussion groups such as the Socratic Circle and the Roundtable to use the Internet for outreach and mobilization were by-passed with the setting up of Think Centre. Think Centre had its roots in writer and researcher James Gomez, who in 1999 decided to use the Internet to market his book *Self-Censorship: Singapore's Shame* after he could not find a distributor for it (for a full account of the Think Centre see Gomez 2002, see George 2006). Because Think Centre was initially registered as a sole-proprietorship business in July 1999, it was able to by-pass the Societies Act and able to operate more freely and maximise the use of the Internet. Hence, unlike the Socratic Circle case in 1995 where the Societies Act was used, for the Think Centre case's the then Public Entertainment Act was used to restrict its activities. (For more examples of Think Centre activities, see Gomez 2002 and George 2006.) These measures directed at the registered discussion groups and entities like the Think Centre involved insisting that online advertisement of political meetings required licences, and that registered political discussions groups cannot use the Internet to attract non-members to attend their activities.

As the pace began to quicken with Think Centre's activities, in February 2001, the PAP government introduced the Political Donations Act which allowed the Minister to gazette any organisation it deemed "political" as a political association and prevent it from receiving foreign funds and placed limits on anonymous donations. Think Centre and the Open Singapore Centre were gazetted as political associations under the Political Donations Act in April 2001 since these two entities were not registered under the Societies Act but as a business. Hence another legal instrument was needed to restrict such groups that took an alternative method of registration. When the Think Centre was gazetted it complied with the Class Licence and promptly registered its website. It also applied to be registered as a society under the Societies Act and had its application approved in October 2001 (George 2006) without any of the restrictions that were imposed on groups such as Socratic Circle and the Roundtable. These legislative changes did not elicit any movement from the Open Singapore Centre (OSC) which chose to maintain its business registration. There was also no movement on the website registration front as the OSC had no website. Instead it continued to use the Singaporeans for Democracy website to place its announcements. When the SDP set up its website in 2001, the OSC announcements shifted to the SDP website. According to Internet activist Yap Keng Ho, Dr. Chee declined Yap's offer to build an OSC website because the activities and volume of information about OSC activities

were too low to justify a stand-alone OSC website. The lack of a website gave OSC the advantage of not falling within the reach of the Class Licence Scheme.

Although Sintercom was able to escape registering under the Class Licence Scheme as noted in the previous section, when the 2001 general elections drew near it was not able to get itself exempted a second time. Government officials told Sintercom's organisers in July 2001 that registration of their website was necessary "to emphasise the need for content providers to be responsible and transparent when engaging in the propagation, promotion or discussion of political issues". Its founder Tan Chong Kee blamed the arbitrariness of political terminology within the Class Licence policy, adding his belief that civil society was a "lost cause" in Singapore (Lee 2004). Instead, Sintercom decided to close down in 2001, but the site itself re-emerged as the New Sintercom and continues to put out some political information (George 2006). What is interesting to note is that founder Tan Chong Kee had already made plans and held preliminary meetings to continue the tradition of election reporting that Sintercom had done for the previous general elections[6]. But this was not done since he decided to close Sintercom down.

With online political expression reaching such unprecedented levels, it was no surprise that amendments were announced to The Parliamentary Elections Act in August 2001. It was introduced in the guise of allowing political parties to advertise on the Internet during election periods (Tan 2001). The amended Act regulates election advertising during an election period by political parties, candidates or their election agents and relevant persons. This includes prescribing, in very general terms, the features that must or must not appear or be used in any such election advertising, and to what kinds of organisations these rules apply to. For instance, political parties were allowed to publicise their candidates and manifestoes on their websites, but non-party political websites were banned from doing so (George 2006). Before the 2001 amendments, the law was silent with regards to online political campaigning. After the 2001 amendments, political parties were allowed to campaign online but non-governmental organizations (NGOs) were forbidden to do so. As NGOs were more progressive and had an superior online presence compared to political parties, the government proscribed them from campaigning.

[6] Interview with Tan Chong Kee on 4 September 2005 in Singapore.

When elections were called for in November 2001, the new legislations were put into use and were directed at the Think Centre. In the first instance, the Centre received a fax from the Elections Department at 5 pm on Friday the 19 October. The fax was an order to remove all materials from their website that could be construed as elections advertising. The fax was received at 5.11pm and the order was to be executed by 11pm the same day, giving the Centre less than six hours to act (Gomez 2002, p.89). The Centre received a second notice from the Elections Department on the 23 October 2001. This time, they wanted the removal of an article entitled "Young Singaporeans, can the PAP safeguard your future" which was written by a youth member of the Singapore Democratic Party. This time the Centre was asked to notify the Elections Department in writing the exact time and date of the article's removal, failing which the Centre would be prosecuted under the Parliamentary Elections Act (Gomez 2002:92). What is ironic is that these threats were directed at the Centre even though the Centre had written to the Elections Department on 10th October 2001, asking what contents from the Centre's website should be removed in order not to infringe the Parliamentary Elections Act. However the Centre obtained no response, but received these two threats of prosecution instead (Gomez 2002:91).

In another online and election-related incident, the police chose to apply the Penal Code against Robert Ho, a retired ex-journalist who posted an allegedly "inflammatory" article on the Singaporeans For Democracy (SFD) website and *soc.culture.singapore* newsgroup on 19th October 2001. The article posted on both sites was the same but with slightly different headlines: "Break the Law – Like Your PAP leaders" and "Break the Law and get away with it, Like PAP", respectively. *The Straits Times* reported that "The document allegedly encouraged electors to enter polling stations without authority on Polling Day", after the Attorney-General declared that four senior PAP ministers were innocent of breaking any laws that disallowed unauthorised persons waiting and loitering outside polling stations on Polling Day in the previous elections in 1997. Instead, Mr. Ho was arrested for attempting to "incite violence and disobedience to the law which is likely to lead to a breach of the peace" (Gomez 2002:99). He was then forced to undergo psychiatric tests. He was acquitted by the courts on 14 December that year [7] after a court-ordered psychiatric evaluation found that he had a "long history of psychiatric illness" (Gomez 2002:99-104).

[7] Interview with Yap Keng Ho on 5 September 2005 in Singapore.

Although Mr. Ho was subjected to Singapore law, the Singaporeans For Democracy (SFD) site which carried his article in addition to news reports and articles about the 2001 elections in a section labeled "elections 2001" was not subjected to censure. It continued to carry reports from international news agencies, news magazines and newspapers, as well as opposition leaders and academics. It also featured letters from the public about election issues, and also contained a number of links to elections-related websites. The other overseas site, Singapore-Window, also continued with its postings. It did not have a dedicated elections section but featured election related reports from mainly foreign news agencies under several of its section headers.

Although action was taken against publicly identifiable individuals and organisations for election related posting on websites both hosted local and overseas, it was different in the case of forums. The 2001 elections saw plenty of election-related posting on forums. Yap Keng Ho, an Internet activist recalls his postings on Sammyboy's Alfresco Coffee Shop. He would attend opposition rallies and then write up his version of events at the rally and post them at the forum. He said his and other postings were not journalistic reports but personal accounts of opposition rallies. Often such accounts were supplemented or contested by other postings.

During this period, new legislations such as the Political Donations Act were introduced and were used to gazette some groups such as Think Centre and the Open Singapore Centre which were not registered under the Societies Act as political associations. Others, which only had virtual existence such as Sintercom were termed under the Class Licence as political sites and were asked to register. The amended Parliamentary Elections Act was also used to force NGOs such as Think Centre to take down so-called election advertising. The Penal Code was also used to take action against one instance of election-related online posting. What was emerging over the run up to each election in 1997 and 2001 was a pattern of policy behaviour whereby the PAP government introduced new legislation to control evolving online political expression.

The 2001 legislation made alternative reporting on the election suffer a setback. While the mainstream media was still deemed to be too biased in their election coverage, the volume of reporting on election rallies dropped, mainly because of the closure of Sintercom. However, the mantle of non-mainstream, alternative election reporting fell onto certain individuals who continued to report on election events. These were posted largely anonymously on forums like

sgForums.com and Sammyboy's Alfresco Coffee Shop, and were not journalistic reports but personal accounts of observations and experiences at opposition rallies. Sometimes these postings were contested. However, the number of postings about the elections was small and not coordinated. Hence when blogs became the newest online phenomena its likely impact during elections and the actions of the ruling party were the focus of much attention in the run up to the 2006 elections.

5 General Elections 2006: Blogs Ignore Legislation

The third phase is from 2002 to 2006. This period was marked in the beginning by a slowdown in the vibrancy of online political expression. However, towards 2005, new technological developments associated with the Web such as blogs and free online petitions, as well as the use of audio and video files provided new surge for online political expression. Most observers accurately predicted the PAP government's attempt to restrict and limit the types of online political content during the 2006 elections.

Fateha.com, the web-based Muslim civil society group, which did not produce election focused content during the 2001 elections, was nevertheless ordered in March 2002 to register its Internet portal as a political website (Zulfikar 2004:349). This order came after its founder and spokesperson, Zulfikar Mohamad Shariff, posited that the PAP's policies of discrimination against Muslims and its military alliances with the United States and Israel may have prompted local Muslim extremists to hatch terror plots (Gomez 2002:38; Zulfikar 2004:346). *Fateha.com* refused to register and challenged the Singapore Broadcasting Authority to answer the question: why an online entity like *The Straits Times Interactive* was not required to register in spite of it also being "engaged in the discussion and propagation of political issues relating to Singapore" (Zulfikar 2004:349).

But before the issue could develop on this front, the editor was confronted with other charges. Police started investigating postings on the website for three articles, each posted on 4, 7 and 19 June 2002. They were entitled respectively "Is Yaacon Ibrahim a hypocrite?", referring to the minister in charge of Muslim affairs; "The real reason for forcing girls to remove the hijab", addressing the government's ban on Muslim headscarves in schools; and "The Ho Ching miracle", about the appointment of Ho Ching (the wife of then-deputy prime minister Lee Hsien Loong) as the executive director of Temasek Holdings, the government's state holding company (Rodan 2003:516). This last article was the main one

investigated, and a charge of criminal defamation was brought against Zulfikar because "it was claimed that the article implied there was nepotism". In July 2002, police officers from the Criminal Investigation Department were issued search warrants to investigate such articles posted on the website, and visited Zulfikar, confiscating his computer from his office (Zulfikar 2004:357; Rodan 2003:516). This incident was concurrent with various forms of government harassment over the last two years, which eventually resulted in the fracturing of the all-volunteer Fateha group. Zulfikar decided to leave the country with his family for Australia later that year (Zulfikar 2004; Rodan 2003:517). *Fateha.com* was taken over by a new team of editors based overseas (Zulfikar 2004:361), but it was reported in April 2004 that *Fateha.com* has ceased its operations. Zulfikar now lives in Australia and has not since returned to Singapore[8].

There was a dip in the energy level on the Internet from 2001 onwards. Many of the methods such as mailing lists and websites were becoming tiresome. There were no major revamps for many of the websites. Sites such as Singapore Window continue to sport the same look and feel. Singaporeans for Democracy stopped updating its site from 2003. Think Centre has not had a website facelift or review since 2000. Most others have remained static. *Fateha.com* closed down in late 2003. The Roundtable and the Socratic Circle both folded as registered societies in 2004 after ten years in existence. Some members of the Roundtable claimed that their group's mainly closed-door format may have been a crippling factor, and that there was only a limited reach since they could only discuss among themselves. Tan Kong Soon, a member of the Socratic Circle, said that during the annual general meeting of the society in October 2004, the members present there resolved to dissolve the society. A primary reason for doing so was that the Socratic Circle found its mandate as a political discussion group to organize members-only activities redundant when the Internet had made it possible for people to discuss politics online without coming together for face-to-face meetings[9]. So to some extent the inability to exploit online communications fully because of the restrictions imposed by the Registrar of Societies made Socratic Circle's existence redundant in the face of political expressions being able to migrate to online domains. There were other sites such as the Void Deck that carry some political commentary, individual sites such as Little Red Speck and satirical ones such as Talking Cock have also sprung up during this period. But these generally

[8] Personal communication via email with Zulfikar Mohd Shariff, 30 May 2006.
[9] Interview with Tan Kong Soon on 27 September 2005 in Singapore.

are not politically robust and have not come under fire. Hence they have not been politically significant.

Around 2004, the Internet in Singapore experienced a rise in Internet activity with the arrival of blogs – short for web logs – which function as online diaries, commentaries or personal columns. Blogs to some extent are an extension of the forum as people viewing the postings on a blog can follow a particular thread and add their comments to it. Blogs in particular bring individual voices to the forefront and it is also personal. This is unlike forums which largely operate as a community where the threads of discussion can drown individual voices. It has been estimated that there are between 2,500 and 15,000 blogs based in Singapore. A listing by Technorati, an Internet search which monitors blogs, has put entries mentioning Singapore politics at 4,500, or 2% of a total of 220,000 blog entries mentioning Singapore. According to blogger Jacob George, there are almost no overtly political blogs in Singapore. Most blogs are personal diaries and journals, and others range from social commentary to humour and satire, with some political issues thrown in. Some blogs have a political angle due to the nature of the work that these bloggers are involved in. For instance, independent filmmaker Martyn See who was under police investigation for "Singapore Rebel" posts details of the ongoing investigation. But there are no blogs dealing exclusively with political commentary and news.[10] Most of these blogs are "nameless" entities whose authors do not provide their real names or email addresses. Media reports identified the growing presence of an Internet savvy younger generation of Singaporeans contributing to political blogging to express their views (Chia 2004). Although the number of political blogs has been small, its numbers were noted to have been increasing. More explicitly political blogs emerged nearer to the 2006 general elections.

The laws legislating the broadcasting of "political" films under the Films Act also had implications for bloggers who carried such films on their site. For instance, blogger Jacob George was questioned by the police over the Internet link he had on his blog to the short film "Singapore Rebel". Its film-maker, Martyn See, was under investigation for making the film, and later releasing copies which became available online (SEAPA 2005) (see also Gomez 2005). In August 2005, bloggers Niraj and Johal of http://pjshow.blogspot.com/ attracted some attention for putting up a podcast of an interview with opposition leader Dr Chee Soon

[10] Interview with Jacob George on 3 October 2005 in Singapore.

Juan of the Singapore Democratic Party. The podcast was a prelude to a video interview they announced they were going to post on their blog (featured at http://pjshow.blogspot.com/2005/08/imagine_112462795073393621.html). Before the film was uploaded, there was significant discussion that if they uploaded their film it will contravene the Films Act. Although the use of the defamation and sedition laws against bloggers as well investigation connected to the Film Act were not directed at "political" bloggers, nevertheless the use of these laws showed that other laws were being used to reel them in. This is in spite of the fact that most blogs do not attract a large following and are not explicitly political. At the same time, because blogs are mostly maintained by individuals, the individual has increasingly become the target of such legislation. This has in part led to or affirmed the high degree of anonymity that most of the authors maintain.

Nevertheless as the momentum built up towards the 2006 general elections, more explicitly political blog sites came onto the scene. These included sites specifically dedicated to providing information during the Singapore elections. Hence, Singapore bloggers and new technology predictably became the target of rules that govern electronic communication in the run up to the 2006 general elections in Singapore. In April 2006, about a month before the general elections, the PAP government "clarified" that the existing rules will continue to affect Internet electioneering. In particular, it identified podcasts and vodcasts as not being among the "positive list" of regulations passed in 2001 that forbid the streaming of 'explicit political content' by political parties or individuals (*The Straits Times*, 4 April 2006). Pictures of rallies were also not allowed to be posted (*The Straits Times*, 5 April 2006). The PAP government also announced that blogs that 'persistently propagate, promote or circulate political issues relating to Singapore' might be asked to register and remove material deemed to election advertising (Chia, Low and Luo 2006). Individual sites and blogs were required to register only if the MDA asks them to do so. And during the election period those registered will not be allowed to provide material that is deemed to be election advertising (*The Straits Times*, 4 April 2006). It was further elaborated that those likely to be compelled to be registered would be those that consistently support or criticize political parties and their candidates (*The Straits Times*, 5 April 2006).

The rules surrounding podcasting affected the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) which had already begun to put up podcasts sometime before the general elections. The Worker's Party, which had plans to set up podcasting decided to shelve its plans (Chia, Low and Luo 2006). Although political parties and

individuals were prevented from using podcasts and vodcasts the rule did not apply to local licensed news companies such as the Singapore Press Holdings and MediaCorp. Nevertheless the SDP did upload a podcast days before nomination day. Soon after, the Elections Department issued an order to remove the audio files and podcasts on the SDP website, to which it complied. Under Section 78A of the Parliamentary Elections Act, the punishment is a fine not exceeding SGD 1000 or a jail term of not more than 12 months or both (Lee 2006a). In response, media watch NGO, Reporters Without Borders, issued a statement denouncing the move by the Elections Department, saying that this amounted to clamping down on freedom of expression (*The Straits Times*, 29 April 2006). Apart from the incident surrounding the SDP podcast, up to date no other blog site has been asked to register or has been charged for breaking the election advertising rules.

In the 2006 general elections, in spite of the PAP trying to introduce regulatory features, there were a wide range of citizen reports, videos and rally photographs. Two websites dedicated themselves to accommodate photos and videos of rallies. One was SGRally (sgrally.blogspot.com) that invited readers to contribute video clips of election rallies anonymously (Channel News Asia, 5 April 2006). The other was Singapore Election Rally Videos (electionrally.blogspot.com). Both these sites made use of free online video sharing services like YouTube that allowed easy upload and distribution of material anonymously. A report by the Institute of Policy Studies stated that up to 50 websites and blogs had 'political' or 'semi-political' content during elections (Sim and Toh 2006). Additionally, online forums and political blogs saw a substantial increase in visitors (Seah 2006). For instance, local blog www.singaporegovt.blogspot.com received between 5,000-6,000 hits during the nine day campaign period which was double the usual hits (Lee 2006b). A report by Channel News Asia stated that before Parliament was dissolved, the number of blog articles on election numbered about 20 a day, after Parliament was dissolved it doubled to 40 and during the nine-day campaign period it averaged over 190 articles a day (Channel News Asia, 13 May 2006). A local website tracking firm Nexlabs put the number of postings on 'Singapore election' as 18 before the Write of Election was issued on 20th April 2006 to about 200 at the peak of the election campaign (Sim and Toh 2006). A podcast put together by two bloggers Lee Kin Mun (aka Mr. Brown) and Benjamin Lee spoofing the CCTV recording of Workers' Party candidate, James Gomez at the Elections Department was downloaded more than 30,000 times three days after it was uploaded and eventually exceeding 100,000 downloads (Lee 2006a).

Apart from blogs, online forums also saw a rise in traffic and postings. *Soc.culture.singapore* saw a little revival in terms of posting on elections related issues. There were also some discussions on online forums hosted by *The Straits Times* and Media Corp. The Young PAP online forum also saw some discussion on election related issues. However, the forum that saw the most traffic and posting was the "sammyboy" forum. The forum carried information about the actual rallies, where to download rally speeches recordings, pictures of rallies and other related election news. There were also instances of breaking news and robust discussion about various election issues and tactics of political parties. The volume of election related online activity prompted PAP's Lee Boon Yang who was the Information Communications and the Arts Minister before parliament was dissolved to state on the eve of polling day (5th May 2006) that the relevant ministry will look at the impact of the Internet during the 2006 general elections. In particular, the scale of influence blogs and podcasts had in influencing the views and shaped opinions (Rahim 2006). Another PAP member of parliament, Denise Phua after the elections said, "I know something has gone wrong when more than 85% (of the traffic) writes negatively about the PAP. This is something that the PAP would do well to take into account...and to manage this channel of communication." (Paulo 2006)

Unlike the two previous elections, attempts to reel in political content during elections did not work during the 2006 general elections. This was largely because blog technology allows users to post content anonymously onto overseas servers. Hence, blog technology as well as do it yourself nature of blog posting allowed many to post election related information onto the Internet, oftentimes anonymously. A mixture of technology coupled by the view that the local media was biased made many bloggers through their actions ignore the legislation that forbid the posting of podcasts and pictures of rallies. This new level of determination by Internet activists to negate the political biasness of local media, was in contrast to the view held before the 2006 elections that Internet and blogs would not have any effect since it reflected what was in the real world – a lack of interest in politics in Singapore (Tan 2006).

6 Impact of the Internet on Singapore's Elections

Ever since the Internet arrived onto the Singapore scene the one question that has dominated and shaped the control over the supply of political content over

Table 1: Percentage of votes for the PAP

General elections	Percentage of votes
1991	61.0
1997	65.0
2001	75.3
2006	66.6

Source: Compiled from the Elections Department of Singapore website (http://www.elections.gov.sg/)

Table 2: Number of seats in Parliament

General elections	People's Action Party	Opposition
1991	77	4
1997	81	2
2001	82	2
2006	82	2

Source: Compiled from the Elections Department of Singapore website (http://www.elections.gov.sg/)

the medium is the impact it will have on politics, especially during elections. Hence with the rise of blogs, the follow up question is whether the information blogs carry are able to affect election outcomes. Academics interviewed by *The Straits Times* state that this is hard to determine (Lee 2006b). However, academics interviewed elsewhere have said that blogs do have an impact on traditional media as blogs have become a source of information and opinion (*The Straits Times*, 28 May 2005).

If we look at Table 1, in terms of absolute election results, not much has changed over the last four general elections. In terms of percentage of votes for the ruling party, it has increased from 61% in the 1991 general elections to 65% and 75.3% respectively in the following two general elections in 1997 and 2001. The percentage of votes did come down to 66.6% in 2006, but they are still better than the 1997 results. Hence the alternative political content on the Internet does not seem to have had an impact on the election percentages in any significant way.

A similar pattern can be discerned if we look at the election results in terms of seats in Table 2. In 1991, the opposition had four elected parliamentary seats. These seats dropped to two seats in the 1997 elections and stayed the same for the 2001 and 2006 elections. What this means is that in electoral terms the Internet has not been able to make any impact on the outcome of election results. Instead

it suggests that the electoral design of Singapore's first-past-the-post system and its Group Representative Constituency are to date impervious to the Internet's impact. Hence, the Internet's contributions to Singapore's multi-party democracy in terms of increasing opposition party parliamentary seats to date have been negligible. The Internet's impact on absolute electoral results needs to be tracked into future elections for a longer term assessment.

However another way of analysing impact is to go beyond the electoral results and analyse other aspects such as the media. For instance, the Internet's value can be seen in terms of not substituting the mainstream media but rather over the last three elections emerging as a niche medium that has the capacity to put out alternative content during elections. This was clearly visible in the 2006 general elections. Images and videos of election rallies that were disallowed by legislation and limited in the local media were almost immediately uploaded on blog sites enabling those in Singapore and abroad to access to campaign messages without censorship and in a direct manner. Online forums also acted as platforms for breaking news regarding the elections. Such information does put some pressure on the mainstream media to report more objectively and makes it harder for the mainstream media to ignore certain news or information. The Internet has developed a capacity to gain exposure in the mainstream media and in some ways "forcing" the mainstream media to compete with online citizen journalism in breaking news and providing fairer coverage.

But some analysts have argued that the impact of the Internet is small because its reach is not as wide as print and television media (Lee 2006b). According to an Institute of Policy Study (IPS) post-election survey, the mainstream media was the most accessed source of information about the elections (IPS 2006) Election rallies and door-to-door visit by candidates and their canvassers came in second. The Internet actually ranked the lowest with a mean score of 2.7 (IPS 2006). This in some ways explains the reason why in absolute electoral terms the impact is not immediately discernable. Although Internet was identified by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) survey as having the lowest mean score of 2.7 compared to newspaper with 3.9 (higher score means greater influence), it is interesting to note that the same survey placed the influence of the Internet among the young as higher. The survey showed that the medium mainly appeals to those below the age of 30. If the volume of younger voters increases in the years to come, the Internet stands to become an influential medium among the young. From a socio-economic point of view the Internet was also a medium accessed above

the mean score of 2.7 by the professional and higher income groups, making the impact of the Internet higher among this group. Hence the Internet as a medium may have an influencing potential over an emerging young generation and those from well to do backgrounds.

The capacity to put out alternative content also puts pressure on the PAP government to review its policies of control. The PAP government has been cautious and has heavily proscribed the Internet for political communications especially during the elections. However, if we look at the level of online political communication allowed during the elections in 1997, 2001 and 2006, technological advancements have actually increased the volume of online political communications during elections. The online events of the 2006 elections, thus prompted the PAP government to announce that it plans to review its policies towards political expression and new media in the next general elections (Leslie Koh 2006). The PAP government stated that the rules governing the use of the Internet to express political views during elections will remain, but it was open to adjust its policies to take into account the evolving Internet technology (Agence France Press, 31 May 2006).

7 Conclusion: Monitoring and Competing with Blogs

Blogs in the 2006 general elections have acted as alternative news sources. The Internet became a supplementary medium that contributed to the total amount of information about candidates, political parties and campaign messages even if its proportion was smaller to other sources of information. In that sense one can argue that in qualitative terms that there has been some movement whereby online citizen journalism has made a contribution towards democracy by being a source of alternative information, albeit a small source. The Internet became an alternative source because bloggers posted reports, videos and pictures of opposition rallies that were not available in the local media. Attempts to declare such postings to being against the Parliamentary Elections Act and punishable by law did not deter Internet activists.

But it remains to be seen what will be the PAP government's response if the proportion of people turning to the Internet for such alternative political content enlarges and if it spills over to the mainstream arena. We get some indication through an incident about two months after the 2006 general elections. Mr. Lee Kim Mun (aka Mr. Brown), of the highly popularly parody of the

CCTV recording of James Gomez at the Election Department, had his blogger's column in the Today newspaper suspended by its editors (Agence France Presse 6 July 2006). The suspension occurred following a strong worded response by the Ministry of Information, Communication and the Arts (MICA) against his satirical piece about the high cost of living in Singapore (Bhavani 2006). MICA accused Mr. Lee of exploiting his access to the mass media to undermine the government's standing with the electorate. If such incidents continue to take place, it is unclear whether the bloggers themselves would be pressured by existing laws to impose constraints on themselves. On the other hand, if bloggers remain willing to venture further with online political expression, its uncertain whether the PAP will embark on a clampdown.

In response, the Singapore Press Holdings (SPH) has also launched a series of initiatives following the general election in May 2006 to reach out to the young who are turning to new media such as blogs and forums for news. Stomp (Straits Times Online Mobile Print) was launched on 14 June 2006 as part of SPH's strategy to provide online users new avenues to express themselves. On 21 October 2006, Singapore Seen was announced as a separate section on Stomp that would allow readers to post their own news and photos (Wong 2006). However, by posting on Stomp Internet users agree to SPH's terms and conditions that Singapore law governs their actions and to submit themselves exclusively to the jurisdiction of the Singapore courts (www.stomp.com.sg). Hence, it is unlikely those who want to post information about the opposition would use SPH's platform for fear of any legal backlash preferring the safety of overseas servers.

The 2006 general election showed that there was a sizeable discrepancy between that which was reported by the local media and the reality of opposition party activities, thereby pointing to a gap in the local media reportage. As a result the local media lost its privileged position as the sole source of information for the 2006 elections, a slack that was picked up by online citizen journalism. Because the impact of alternative online political content during elections is still not clear, one way or another, such content and the different online platforms used to supply it will likely remain the target of close observation and competition in the run up to the next elections.

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